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ABSTRACT

Summarizing the results of informal discussions among the commissions and standing committees of the National Council of Teachers of English, this paper outlines key educational trends and issues in areas of the English language arts. Various sections of the paper contain information from the commissions on English language, literature, composition, reading, media, and curriculum, and the standing committees on research and censorship. Among the trends and issues discussed are the following: (1) the positive development of collaborative research involving classroom teachers, (2) the disappointingly narrow applications of computers in teaching English, (3) the discouraging decline of pluralistic themes in literary texts, (4) the disturbing increase in use of computer software in the teaching of literature, (5) the unfortunate mandated use of anthologies and standard textbooks in literature instruction, (6) the dangerous proliferation of achievement testing, (7) the moderately heartening increase in required writing samples on English achievement tests, (8) the failing efforts to encourage holistic and meaning-making approaches to students and their language, (9) the poor preparation of teachers in media literacy, (10) the negative trend toward segmenting knowledge in the curriculum, (11) the need to integrate the teaching of language arts at all levels, (12) the alarming exclusion of humanities in curricula, (13) legislative interference in the formation of effective curricula, (14) the need for classroom practices that reflect the insights of research, and (15) censorship of literature and emended or bowdlerized school texts. (HTH)

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SECOND ANNUAL TRENDS AND ISSUES STATEMENTS—NCTE COMMISSIONS AND STANDING COMMITTEES

Compiled by Charles Suhor and Michael Spooner

At the 1983 Denver convention, the NCTE Commissions and Standing Committees informally discussed trends and issues in their various fields. Because those groups include some of the most forward-looking members of the profession, their ideas (published in Council-Grams, March 1984) were received with considerable interest. The commissions and standing committees conducted similar discussions at the Detroit Convention in November, 1984, and the results are summarized below. While the ideas do not constitute official positions of NCTE or the groups themselves, the 1984 trends and issues reports again provide stimulating and challenging viewpoints. Key phrases from the reports are underscored.

COMMISSION ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The Commission on the English Language (James C. Stalker, Director) applauds two major developments in lexicography: the projected publication of Volume 1 of the Dictionary of American Regional English, and a plan for entering the entire Oxford English Dictionary into computer module form. The Commission is also very glad to see the continued development of collaborative research involving classroom teachers—a movement that insures that research is put to use in schools.

Other developments are viewed with misgiving, in particular the narrow applications of

CS 208 751

computers in teaching English. Computers are often being used as electronic workbooks and drill masters rather than as tools which ease the difficulties of rewriting and editing. This promotes the idea that language study is the study of grammar and the acquisition of standard English—a view which ignores research in sociolinguistic variation. A related problem is the increasingly negative, uninformed beliefs about bilingual education.

The Commission laments the increasing demand for more formalized testing of both students and teachers. Since student performance on standardized tests of language is only distantly related to their abilities to perform in actual situations, their test scores should be used with extreme care. Yet students take more tests and teachers teach to those tests, thus trivializing the language curriculum.

In part, these tests stem from recent demands for common curriculum—a trend which ignores, indeed denies, the language differences among children. This trend is related to the newly emerging deemphasis on oral language development. Language proficiency is again becoming synonymous with the reading and writing ability, particularly in elementary schools. Ultimately, these problems reflect a continuing misunderstanding of what constitutes quality in education. Current views of quality narrow the curriculum to content that is measurable and to a concern with time-on-task, which emphasizes quantity rather than quality.

Three important problems are at a fairly high level of abstraction. 1) The continuing research focus on meta-analysis stresses quantifiable data, to the exclusion of qualitative studies. 2) Although cross-disciplinary studies often provide fruitful data on language,

some researchers are inadequately trained in fields from which they borrow methodologies. (E.g., historians, sociologists, and anthropologists are inclined to broaden the term "literacy" to mean "any and all interactions with print.") 3) Some educational terms are being misused and broadened to the extent that they mean nothing, or even acquire the opposite of their original meanings. An example is the term "whole language." Contrary to its original focus on the centrality of meaning and the interdependence of language systems, the term has become trendy and is now applied, for example, to phonics programs.

COMMISSION ON LITERATURE

The Commission on Literature (Darwin T. Turner, Director) found fewer reasons for satisfaction than for anxiety. Three positive trends were identified. 1) The increased prominence of storytelling in English curricula suggests greater respect for oral literature as an art form. The literature of the world originated in the oral tradition. In a sense, failure to recognize oral literature is a refusal to acknowledge the history of literature. The trend suggests that a broader historical and cultural perspective is being achieved. 2) Literary texts for very young children have improved dramatically, apparently in response to mass market demands for higher quality and as a result of competition among publishers, authors and illustrators to meet that demand. 3) Texts of the classics are being reissued for younger students in particularly attractive formats.

Despite some positive trends, the status of literature in education has been diminished by hostility, bigotry, ignorance, indifference, and neglect on the part of pressure groups. If the current increase in censorship continues, eventually the only literature permitted in

the classroom will be so bland and benign that it could not reflect the actual world in which students live. A related concern is the decline of pluralistic themes in literary texts; and in the past three years, racial minorities have virtually disappeared from children's literature.

The current emphasis on excellence in education and on implementation of various reform reports gives little consideration to the needs of literary study. Models for teacher-effectiveness programs stress mastery of materials by the end of a lesson. Such expectations are invalid for literary study, where emphasis is on the development of thought processes rather than acquisition of facts. Last year the Commission noted that reform proposals called for little emphasis on preparation in teaching literature. This year the Commission expanded its concern, noting that emphasis is placed on teaching reading comprehension rather than on responses to literature. These signs suggest a general belief that literature is relatively inconsequential or that there are no problems related to the teaching of it.

The Commission is disturbed by the increased use of computer software in the teaching of literature. Whereas technological aids have supplementary value, they should not be used to replace the practice of reading literature.

The Commission reiterates its concern about mandated use of anthologies and standard textbooks in the classroom. The trend towards a standard literary canon gives teachers less opportunity to use diverse literary works. In addition, the Commission regards with alarm the trend in many districts to misassign individuals not trained primarily as librarians or as teachers of literature to those positions, where they are given the

responsibility of selecting books and guiding students in literature.

COMMISSION ON COMPOSITION

The Commission on Composition (Charles I. Schuster, Director) discussed issues in six major categories: teacher-training; the relation between theory, research and practice; forms and purposes of school writing; testing; computers; and literacy.

Commission members agreed that strong objective and comprehensive studies on educating teachers in the teaching of writing are needed. A number of models for this training have been developed, but there has been little effort to describe and differentiate those models. Several members stressed the need for school-based training of teachers of other subjects who have been assigned to teach writing.

The Commission expressed concern about the gap between theories of composition espoused in NCTE sessions and publications, and the curriculum prescriptions contained in materials published for students. Members also agreed that attention should be paid to broadening the purposes of writing done in school. The common assumption is that we are training students to become capable academic writers. However, composition courses at all levels can include personal and business letters, memos, narratives, reflections, expressive responses and the like.

The Commission opposed the current proliferation of testing. Tests take time away from instruction and often encourage practices which are less than ideal. While the

Commission is moderately heartened by signs that English achievement tests are beginning to include writing samples, the test topics remain problematic, and usually no time is allowed for revision. Members further expressed concern about the perceived move from general impression scoring of writing samples toward the old-style checklists containing discrete items.

Commission members pointed to methods for evaluating educational software and hardware. They strongly agreed that word processors are no substitute for teachers. "We don't want legislatures to spend money on word processors at the expense of salaries and inservice education for teachers," one member said. In support of this, members downplayed the "revolution in literacy" expected in some quarters due to the advent of computers and word processors. In one member's view, the new technology will have an effect no greater than the advent of the typewriter, "...not a negligible effect, perhaps, but certainly nothing of sci-fi, Armageddon proportions."

COMMISSION ON READING

The Commission on Reading (Dorothy J. Watson, Director) was deeply concerned about the profession's failing efforts to encourage holistic and meaning-making approaches to students and their language. We need to root our strategies for teaching reading in a psychology that does not see reading or any language act as an isolated behavior, but rather as part of our general capacity to represent and interpret our experiences symbolically. Understanding of the reading process is thwarted by a mechanistic view that generally assumes that everything consists of independent, separately identifiable parts that can be recombined into successively larger wholes—until one reaches the

ultimate whole. Such a reductionist view leads to a "skills" approach to reading. A related concern is the notion held by many in our profession—including some researchers and publishers—that beginning reading is qualitatively different or separate from comprehension.

Our failed efforts toward holistic literacy programs are illustrated by the education of out-of-school/unemployed adults. GED and ABE materials are mainly drill/skill, anti-holistic, and anti-meaning-making. There is a need for new kinds of materials that support teacher re-education and relate to interests of discouraged students. Holistic curricula are also frustrated by the continuing impact of standardized tests. The negative influence of testing on curriculum makes it necessary to disseminate information on whole language teaching/assessment to parents, school boards, administrators and all teachers. The Commission notes the lack of information immediately available to the larger group of teachers. It seems that the small "cutting edge" group of teachers is characteristically many years ahead of the majority of professionals. Among those who should be aware of new knowledge are teachers in content areas.

Nevertheless, there is a slight movement toward a transactional, holistic model of language learning and curriculum. A growing network of individuals and teacher support groups is working with holistic approaches. The Commission believes that these professionals should be recognized and their efforts empowered with endorsement and commendation.

Another issue is reading in broader contexts than the printed page. We need to help

society go beyond the media events to understand and judge information. A related matter is the lack of good computer software. Most language arts material resembles workbooks, requiring single word answers or multiple choice selections. This is incompatible with our priority--active language use. Finally, the descriptive potential and power of semiotic inquiry into the reading process and reading instruction was mentioned as an issue that needed attention.

COMMISSION ON MEDIA

The Commission on Media (David England, Director) focused strongly on three matters: teacher preparation, computers, and fragmentation of knowledge. Of immediate concern was the status of the media preparation of teachers. Commission members agreed that teachers are not being well prepared to deal with media in any way in the classroom.

Regarding the status of computers in the classroom, the Commission continues to see danger in the current idea that "we-must-get-computers-for-the-sake-of-getting-computers." However, the profession is showing increased interest in the informed use of computers, and teachers are attempting to direct the course of software development.

The trend in curriculum toward segmenting knowledge was of great concern. The Commission notes the decline of team-teaching approaches and the integration of media into English/language arts instruction. This trend reduces students' understanding of the interconnections among various branches of knowledge; fuller use of media would help to integrate experience for students.

The Commission also discussed the uses of video in legal processes; the images of the teaching profession that students see in TV and movies; and censorship of nonprint media. Teachers and the teaching profession are not being portrayed positively by the media; therefore, young people may see teaching as an even less attractive career than other factors, such as salary, would already have dictated. The use of media—from computer tapes to videotapes—in the legal system is increasing and raises a number of moral and ethical issues. Finally, consistent with the Commission's previous alarm over censorship of mass media, it was agreed that teachers need to be awakened to the many materials available to interpret their use of potentially controversial media materials to parents, school boards, and administrators.

COMMISSION ON CURRICULUM

The Commission on Curriculum (Eileen Lundy, Director) identified five categories of trends and issues. The first was the need to integrate the teaching of the language arts at all levels. At the elementary level, this means reuniting reading instruction and teacher-education with speaking, listening, writing, and observation. At secondary and college levels, it means reuniting the study of literature with other language arts. At all levels, it means addressing the interrelationship of the language arts with growth in critical thinking. Members suggested that the work done in communications (particularly in oral interpretation of literature) provides links between speaking, performance, and understanding of literature. In line with this, English educators at all levels need to recognize the place of speaking in the language arts curriculum. Finally, members saw the growth of writing-across-the-curriculum as a pedagogically sound trend.

The second category centered around the place of the humanities in a well-rounded education. Current state- and district-level emphases on testing militate against the development of humanities curricula. Censorship of literature and textbooks also pushes the humanities to the side. In many states, less money is being dedicated to library books for schools and colleges. In two-year colleges, overemphasis on vocational preparation often leads to neglect of the humanities. In elementary schools, the emphasis on handwriting, spelling, and grammar often leaves little time for literature, oral language activities, and composition. Video and film are being used in schools and colleges, but such use remains qualitatively unexamined from the standpoint of influence on the acquisition of knowledge and the study of literature. Another related trend is the recent call for a return to a core curriculum. Some members pointed to the difficulty of defining the content of such a core. Others contrasted the call for core programs with the call for better development of students' critical thinking, reading, and writing abilities. The core curriculum idea, like the notion of "cultural literacy," proposes a product of the curriculum; the critical thinking idea designates the processes we want our students to be able to use. Curricula in which the two are wedded successfully need to be developed.

The third cluster of issues was legislative interference in the formation of curriculum. State-mandated testing and legislatively imposed curricula focus mainly on minimal competencies for students and teachers. As a result, complex problems are reduced to simplistic questions with simplistic answers. This creates a widening gap between what educators know from research and what they are permitted to do in practice. Textbook-centered and test-driven curricula discourage creative planning and teaching and often result in heavy teaching loads, over-enrolled classes, and growing demands for paper

work. Legislative interference is an attempt to raise standards; yet this trend promises to lead to increasing numbers of dropouts at the secondary level.

The fourth category was problems of teacher preparation. These include the use and often the exploitation of part-time or adjunct instructors in English at college levels, and the hiring and continued service of teachers unprepared to teach English at secondary and elementary levels. The commission further noted the loss of well-prepared, well-educated candidates to other professions and the "greying" of present faculty. Several members also spoke of poor education of many public school administrators—not referring to lack of degrees, but to the low quality and narrowness of education. Finally, the fifth area of concern was the continued need to seek racial and sexual equality in the staffing of schools and colleges and in the treatment of students.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON RESEARCH

The Standing Committee on Research (Kenneth Kantor, Chair) discussed issues in four related areas: policy issues, testing and evaluation, needed research, and teacher education. Questions of policy were mainly related to educational reform proposals and the response of the research community to those proposals. It was suggested that a usable synthesis of research findings, tied to the realities of the reform movement, be developed. Specifically, we need to consolidate what we know about effective language arts instruction and make that knowledge available to legislators and other policy-makers. A further specific concern was relationship of the movement for "excellence" to educational equity.

The issue of the extent to which assessment drives instruction was raised. There is a need both to reduce the negative effects of skills testing and to create instruments that more accurately measure reading, writing, and thinking processes. The committee was also concerned about the use of certain outcome measures in assessing teaching effectiveness. Much of the "time on task" research fails to comment on the nature and quality of the tasks under consideration. How, for example, is time for writing being spent, and how might it be better spent?

The Committee identified needed areas of further research as response to and teaching of literature, reading-writing connections, uses of computer technology, and cognitive processes involved in language development. Additionally, there was a call for contextual studies which consider literacy in its broadest sense, taking social, cultural, political, and historical as well as psychological factors into account. Such investigations require an interdisciplinary stance and close cooperation among scholars in the psychology, sociology, linguistics, rhetoric, philosophy, and literary and other critical theories.

Finally, the Committee discussed research and teacher education, and the need for classroom practice which reflect the insights of research. One member cited the need to study the effects of inservice projects, particularly looking at how teachers with internalized strategies respond to innovative ideas. Another cited the importance of examining models of teacher education involving collaborative learning. Relatedly, several members expressed support for the idea of teacher as researcher, at the same time citing the need to define that role more carefully.

STANDING COMMITTEE AGAINST CENSORSHIP

The Standing Committee Against Censorship (Lee Burress, Chair) notes that national attention was given recently to the removal of Huckleberry Finn from use in the Waukegan, Illinois school system. Similar publicity appeared when three books by Judy Blume, Deenie, Blubber, and Then Again Maybe I Won't, were removed from the Peoria, Illinois elementary school libraries. The books were returned later on a restricted basis. Undoubtedly similar events occurred throughout the United States with less publicity. With regard to censorship pressures of this sort, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

A second issue of significance was the decision by Judge Sarah Evans Barker concerning the anti-pornography ordinance of Indianapolis, Indiana. The judge said that the ordinance, which defined pornography as a form of discrimination against women, violated the First Amendment. The ordinance concerns education because, if found constitutional, it would restrain with considerable severity a variety of materials currently found in public school libraries, including Ms Magazine and Our Bodies, Ourselves.

A third issue is public awareness of the degree to which school texts are currently emended or bowdlerized by major publishers. The Minneapolis public schools, Richmond public schools, and others have recently become aware of this problem. A resolution passed by NCTE at the Detroit meeting deals with this matter.